VISUAL AND SCENIC RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

Redwood National and State Parks include many of California's most significant and irreplaceable natural and cultural visual resources, including the largest remaining stands of old-growth coast redwoods, prairie vistas, historic farmlands, wild rivers and unspoiled coastlines. Effective management and protection of these and other visual resources require a method to identify areas of visual sensitivity and provide a basis for further project-specific visual analysis.

A method for understanding the visual resources within this region follows, including definitions of terms, a description of regional landscape character and units, and a description of landscape types.

VISUAL RESOURCE TERMS

Landscape Character

Landscape character refers to the overall impression created by the unique combination of all visual landscape features. Landscape character is commonly described in terms of scale, line, form, color, texture and density. How these variables come together, and the degree to which they are visible to an observer, largely determines scenic quality.

Landscape Unit

Landscape units describe areas of similar character within a region. The edges dividing one unit from another are often defined by changes in geologic features, vegetation communities, cultural elements, and other visual boundaries. Each landscape unit is given a name based on its dominant geographic features. For example, the visual landscape character of a prairie and farmland unit is distinctly different from that of an old- growth redwood unit.

Macro and Micro Landscapes

Macro landscapes appear relatively unified, with similar or complementary features extending far into the distance. Most features can be seen at a glance from any one of a number of vantage points. A view from an open hillside, prairie, or coastline are examples of a macro landscape.

A micro landscape also has similar or complementary features. However, from within a micro landscape, views are screened to a short distance from any given vantage point. For example, visual experiences from deep within an old-growth redwood forest are typical of micro landscapes.

Landscape Types

Landscape types are used to classify levels of visual sensitivity. A landscape type is an area of similar landform and land cover. Landform generally refers to topography or slope, and land cover usually refers to the predominant vegetation. Landscapes having similar landform and cover will have similar sensitivity to comparable degrees of development. One or more landscape types may occur repetitively within a single landscape unit.

Observer Response (Viewpoints)

Highways, roads, trails, and beaches, in combination with specific observation points, provide a changing series of views for RNSP visitors. The view changes depend on the visitor's location, direction of and obstructions to views, recreational activity, seasonal changes (leaves on or off trees), and weather phenomena such as fog, rain, and clouds. The visitor experience is influenced by these changes.

Dynamic Landscapes

Landscapes, whether macro or micro, are constantly changing. Landscape change over time is an outcome of both natural and cultural processes. For example, the short-term visual impact of a reclamation project may eventually result in long-term visual benefits.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AND UNITS

Redwood National and State Parks share a regional setting that includes some of the most unique and spectacular visual character of any place on earth. Most of the visual resources within this region remain a tremendous source of wonder and inspiration for millions of visitors.

For purposes of this planning effort, the regional landscape has been characterized into five distinct landscape units. The visual effect on an observer varies considerably depending on such things as location of the observer, topography; specific kinds of density and configuration of vegetation; season; time of day; and weather. The role and importance of each of these needs to be factored into the visual analysis and treatment recommendations for a development project.

Old-Growth Redwood Groves

Old-growth redwood groves are a prime visual resource and are a distinct landscape unit. Old-growth redwood groves become visually distinct in macro landscapes when they form an edge along open landscapes such as prairies, coastlines, and large rivers. Typically, old-growth redwood groves provide observers with an awe-inspiring micro landscape experience.

Generally, views within old-growth redwood groves are restricted to an immediate area. The dominant visual orientation is vertical. The edges of groves are visually sensitive to change. Screening development within groves is possible with adequate visual buffering.

Previously Harvested Redwood and Mixed Forests

Second- and third-growth redwood forests and mixed forests are obvious in the regional landscape. From a macro landscape perspective, these forests typically have varying visual signatures resulting from variations in line, form, color, texture and vegetation density. These variations are an outcome of forest age, original method of harvest, location of the forest, and vegetation species.

Typically, previously harvested and mixed forests are densely vegetated and views can be greatly restricted. Screening development is possible if an adequate buffer is maintained. New clearings are generally very apparent. The micro landscape in previously harvested areas has changed considerably since park expansion in 1978. Trees are now 20–50 years old, and in many areas the lower limbs of these young trees have dropped off, which has and will continue to improve visibility under the second growth.

Coastline and Coastal Environments

In addition to the world-renowned redwood forests and groves, the region's picturesque coastline and associated coastal environments are prime visual resources. Impressive, jagged rock outcrops and cliffs enclose or alternate with beaches of varying extent. Coastal bays, coves, tidepools, marshes, and river mouths add tremendous visual contrasts and variety.

Coastline and coastal environments are visually dynamic landscapes, having dramatic contrasts and expansive views. Coastline and coastal environments provide an endless variety of micro and macro visual experiences.

Coastline and coastal environments commonly have unobstructed surrounding views. Development is not easily concealed. The scale, line, form, color, and texture of structures can easily intrude on coastal landscape character. Clearings and other coastal development activities can be very apparent from higher vantage points such as hillsides and bluffs.

Rivers and Streams

Drainages from the rivers and streams that cut through the coastal ridges on their way to the ocean provide additional visual variety and seasonal variation to the landscape. The finest redwood groves are usually found bordering these drainages on associated flat alluvial benches.

Visually, rivers and streams are especially significant if they are adjacent to heavily forested landscapes or dramatic geologic features. Depending on adjacent landforms and land cover, large rivers and streams provide spectacular macro viewing opportunities while smaller streams tend to provide more inwardly focused micro experiences.

In general, rivers and streams are visually exposed landscapes that provide partial views to surrounding areas. Development is not easily concealed because of the visual contrasts that naturally exist near the stream or river channel. Clearings and other development activities along rivers and streams are typically very visible from the channel and higher vantages such as hillsides or bluffs.

Prairies and Farmlands

Open meadows, prairies, and farmlands provide strong contrasts and visual variety to the predominantly forested landscape of this region. These units may contain numerous highly visible cultural elements that become significant landscape features. Some of these features dominate the landscape and strongly influence overall visual quality.

Prairies and farmlands frequently provide a pastoral visual experience, especially when associated with cultural features such as farm structures. Prairies and farmlands are especially significant if located near shorelines, adjacent to rivers, or on ridges. Prairies and farmlands often provide strong macro visual experiences.

Typically, open prairies and farmlands provide exceptional views to surrounding areas. Development is not easily concealed and can intrude on landscape character. Changes in prairie edges, typically defined by treelines and ridges, are very noticeable. Within prairies and farmlands, the effects of prescribed fire or agricultural activities can visually impact the landscape. Depending on land forms, land cover, and viewshed, these impacts can visually dominate the landscape.

LANDSCAPE TYPES AND SENSITIVITY

Twelve landscape types have been identified for Redwood National and State Parks. The landform (slope) and land cover category together are the basic tools for determining the sensitivity of any specific area or site to development, or how capable it is of visually absorbing change without detrimental impacts on scenic quality. Different landscape types may appear more than once within any given landscape unit.

Landscape types are based on the following land form and land cover characteristics:

Landform:	Land Cover:
Flat (0-4%)	Open (minimum cover)
Rolling (5-19%)	Semi-open
Steep (20-39%)	Moderately forested
	Heavily forested (maximum cover)

Landscape types with **high** sensitivity lack potential intervening elements, and the addition of structures and other developments will be apparent and contrast with existing conditions.

Landscape types with **moderate** sensitivity have the opportunity for intervening elements and have a more complex topography that could potentially conceal structures and other developments and reduce the visual impact.

Landscape types with **low** sensitivity offer the most opportunities, in terms of macro landscapes, for concealing structures and other developments by a combination of landforms and vegetation.

TABLE 13: LANDSCAPE TYPE VISUAL SENSITIVITY MATRIX

Landform	Land Cover			
	Open	Semiopen	Moderately Forested	Heavily Forested
Flat	Highly sensitive	Moderately sensitive	Low sensitivity	Low sensitivity
Rolling	Highly sensitive	Moderately sensitive	Moderately sensitive	Low sensitivity
Steep	Highly sensitive	Highly sensitive	Moderately sensitive	Moderately sensitive